

# Young People and Grief

There is much hesitation and discomfort around grief, which can make it difficult to know how best to support someone who is grieving. When the grieving person is an teenager, these difficulties can be heightened. Young people are already going through a complex time, working out who they are and how their world works. When grieving they may distance themselves further from others, including adults. This makes it difficult to know how they are coping, and what sort of support they need. This factsheet offers some guidance for adults (parents, carers, relatives, teachers and others) to help you support a young person who is grieving and help them to grow through the experience.

## What is grief?

Grief is the human response to change and loss in our lives, such as the death of someone we love. It is a natural and normal response, which has a physical impact on our bodies as well affecting our emotions and our thinking. Grief challenges the way we think about ourselves and the world, and influences our spirituality and relationships.

## How do young people express grief?

It is important to remember that grief is a normal and natural response and that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each young person will experience grief in their own unique and personal way. However, it is common for young people to retreat privately into their grief and they may withdraw from friends and family. They may believe that the intensity of their grief is much greater than that of those around them, and can fear they are losing control. Some (not an exhaustive list) of the reactions young people may experience are below;

### Emotions that young people may feel ...

- May be angry, frustrated or disillusioned
- May feel confused, anxious and overwhelmed
- May feel lonely and isolated from peers
- May sink into their grief and feel consumed by their sadness

### Thoughts that young people may have ...

- May feel tormented by their thoughts
- May worry about the future
- If bereaved by suicide they may be more susceptible to suicidal thoughts

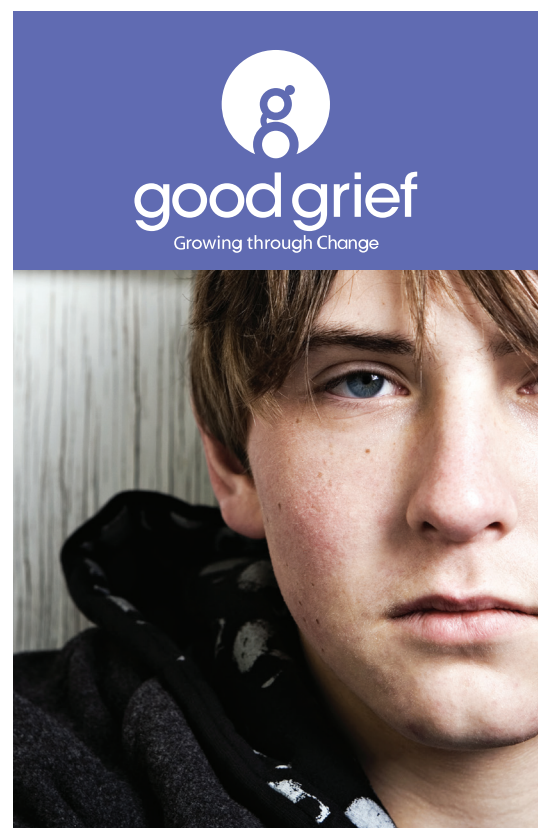
### Behaviours that young people may show ...

- May engage in risk-taking behaviour
- May distance themselves from family or 'lash out'

### Physical Reactions that young people may experience ...

- May have trouble sleeping
- May be tired, distracted, lethargic, and unable to concentrate
- May experience anxiety and panic attacks
- May experience digestive problems
- May feel physical aches and pain

Young people are already engaged in a process of questioning who they are, and how they fit into the world. This can make it complex to know what is an expression of grief and what are normal teenage changes. Trying to decipher the difference doesn't really matter. The main thing is to support the young person as they are at the present time.



## The grief process

Grief is a challenging and complex time of hurt, but it is a normal part of life. It is important to remember that young people who are grieving are not 'unwell.' They can cope with grief, and grow through the experience, if they understand what is happening and have appropriate support. In thinking about how best to support them it can be helpful to understand the grief response as a process or journey.

## How to support a young person who is grieving

If we think of grief as a journey, our role as adults is to help young people navigate it. Young people are unlikely to want an adult with them every step of the way, but they need opportunities to reflect on how they are travelling. Most importantly they need adults who proactively and regularly check they are heading in the right direction and who are also available for advice when they need it.

## How to provide the support young people need

Young people need:

- a strong, loving relationship with a parent or primary caregiver who they can rely upon and trust.
- opportunities to talk through and make sense of what has happened.
- space to express a wide range of emotions (such as sadness, anger, fear, guilt and humour).
- help to talk through and make sense of their emotions and reactions, with someone who won't judge them for their egocentricity.
- security from their usual boundaries and expectations.
- opportunities to be involved in decisions linked to their loss or any further changes.

As a parent, don't be afraid to ask other trusted adults to help support your child. Some young people may find it easier to speak with someone outside the family. Encourage young people to talk over their feelings with the school counsellor if they are feeling overwhelmed.

## How to help as relative, family friend, teacher or other professional

- Let young people know their loss is recognised
- Identify yourself as a safe person who is open and willing to listen (although don't force young people to talk)
- Help young people to manage their feelings in different contexts (such as at school)
- Monitor their progress on their studies and identify if they might need additional support (this helps prevent schoolwork becoming a further source of stress)
- Check in with the young person regularly to keep communication open over time



Good Grief's *Seasons for Growth* program gently helps young people learn about the grief process. It is usually free of charge. It may be beneficial to find out whether your school offers the program. In addition, if you are supporting a grieving child or young person that is overwhelmed and not coping over an extended period of time, it is a good idea to connect them with some additional professional support.

